



CGA Appropriations Committee

March 22, 2013 Public Hearing

Opposition to:

HB 6353 AAC State Budget Reform

HB 6354 AA Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations
Concerning General Government

Comments submitted by Christine S. Horrigan, Government Director,
League of Women Voters of Connecticut

The League of Women Voters of Connecticut is a nonpartisan, statewide organization committed to effective public policy and the active involvement of citizens in their government. On behalf of the League, I thank you for the opportunity to comment on HB 6353 *AAC State Budget Reform* and HB 6354 *AA Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Concerning General Government*. ***The League strongly opposes these bills.***

The League believes that the public should have confidence in the integrity of its government. To accomplish this end, we support measures to ensure the existence of ***strong, effective, independent watchdog agencies*** such as the current Office of State Ethics (OSE), the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC) and the State Elections Enforcement Commission (SEEC). In addition, we support the allocation of resources necessary for these commissions to fulfill their responsibilities.

Independence is critical to strong, effective watchdog agencies. In order to garner the public's confidence, watchdog agencies must be protected from political pressure, free from conflicts of interest and immune to outside influences. The Governor's plan for the OSE, FOIC and SEEC, as outlined in HB 6353 and HB 6354, threatens the independence of these important watchdog agencies in several ways:

- Current law prohibits the Governor from reducing the annual budgets of the OSE, FOIC and SEEC. *See Connecticut General Statutes Section 1-81a, Section 1-205a, and Section 9-7c.* This law, passed during the Rowland era, was designed to insulate these agencies from political pressure by a single individual. HB 6353 strips the watchdog agencies of their decision-making authority on budgetary issues and changes the way in which budget requests are prepared. It also removes the prohibition against reducing their allotment requisitions and allotments in force. The loss of budgetary authority and the elimination of safeguards against reductions as contemplated under HB 6353 would undermine the independence of these agencies, placing them essentially at the financial mercy of the Governor and the Office of Policy and Management.

- Section 131 of HB 6354 proposes transferring the legal and investigative staffs of the SEEC, FOIC and OSE to a newly created legal and enforcement division within the Office of Governmental Accountability (OGA). This division would investigate and prosecute complaints and provide advisory opinions and staff assistance to the watchdog agencies. Investigations of ethics, election-related and freedom of information complaints would no longer be conducted by independent watchdog agencies, but instead would fall under the auspices of the executive administrator of the OGA, a gubernatorial appointee with the power to hire and fire legal staff. If implemented as proposed, the potential for conflicts of interests, political pressure and undue influence would be real and significant.
- As part of the compromise that led to the creation of the OGA, a Governmental Accountability Commission, consisting of representatives from the affected agencies, was established with the power to make recommendations to the Governor for candidates for the executive administrator of the OGA and, more importantly, to terminate the employment of the executive administrator. *See Connecticut General Statute Section 1-301.* Although the executive administrator was designated by the Governor, the Governmental Accountability Commission retained the ability to fire the executive administrator, making the executive administrator, at least in part, accountable to the watchdog agencies. Section 133 of HB 6354 eliminates the ability of the Governmental Accountability Commission to terminate the executive administrator. The executor administrator, who under the Governor's plan would control the budget and legal and enforcement activities of the watchdog agencies, would be answerable to only one individual—the Governor himself.

In 2011, the League opposed the creation of the Office of Governmental Accountability on the grounds that it would compromise the authority, effectiveness and independence of the watchdog agencies. This new consolidation of the legal and enforcement functions of the watchdog agencies, coupled with the inability to dismiss the executive administrator and the loss of budgetary authority, will only serve to further weaken the SEEC, FOIC and OSE and to erode the public's trust in its government.

We understand that in this difficult economic climate streamlining agencies across the board and meeting consolidation targets is appealing. ***However, we cannot allow false economy to compromise the important work that these independent agencies are doing for our democracy.*** Please don't turn watchdogs into lapdogs. Vote NO on HB 6353 and HB 6354.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on these bills.